

Banned In Boston: Censorship and Self-Censorship in Boston's Federal Theatre Project

Chapter 1: "Banned in Boston" Censorship

In 1904, the city of Boston passed a law giving mayors the ability to revoke a theatre's license for any reason.¹ This act heralded the decades of heavy censorship leading up to the Federal Theatre Project's production years. Through both cultural institutions and government authorities, Boston developed a censorship apparatus to shut down unapproved artworks. Upper classes and conservative groups used theatrical censorship—along with literary and film censorship—to prevent radicalism, sexuality, anti-religiousness, and progressiveness. After several prominent censorship cases in the years preceding the FTP cemented the apparatus, the Project's first major production ran into a censorship scandal of its own.

Brahmins, the social elite descended from early colonists, had long arbitrated Boston culture. Other social groups like the less affluent "Yankee" colonist stock looked to the Brahmins for taste in art, literature, and theatre.² In the early Twentieth century, this select group turned to traditional values in an attempt to retain prominence they were losing in the political arena, as Yankees and new immigrant groups such as the Irish and Italians gained much political power during this period. New generations and social groups brought current business techniques and boss politics, as well as modernism in the arts and sciences, but the Brahmins refused to engage in modern values. As social historian Frederic Cople Jaher explains, "in politics, as in education and business, those who

¹ John H. Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (New York,

² Paul S. Boyer, *Purity in Print: Book Censorship in America from the Gilded Age to the Computer Age*, 2nd ed, *Print Culture History in Modern America* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 169.

embraced contemporary values opposed those who recoiled to the refuge of class pride . . . Better to yield the field than to adopt the policies of encroachers; better to be the victims of class virtue than victors by class compromise.”³ Though the Brahmins lost political ground, they continued to dominate as leaders of cultural institutions, and their anti-modernism stunted Boston’s artistic growth.

To assert their superiority, Brahmins looked nostalgically back to the eras that had given them fortune and prominence, entrenching their culture in tradition. By emphasizing their “golden years,” the Brahmins could maintain societal esteem. In literature, they favored venerated writers of the 19th century—a time of Brahmin prosperity—such as James Russell Lowell and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.⁴ They also continued to value the Classical virtues of Humanism and Hellenism, including reason, restraint, and tradition.⁵ Such values kept Brahmin culture, traditions, and morality, connected to the past. Consequently, the Brahmins spurned modern intellectual and artistic movements. They not only condemned the entrepreneurial capitalism that usurped old wealth, but also socialism, unionization, and immigration. Brahmins saw progressive social movements and the art that emerged alongside them as the “potentially fatal malaise of modern times;” their Watch and Ward Society banned hundreds of “inappropriate” books from Boston shops.⁶ As nostalgia for mightier times propped up their current image, the Brahmins successfully maintained cultural leadership—particularly over the Yankees—and led the crusade against modern “evils.”

³ Frederic Cople Jaher, *The Urban Establishment: Upper Strata in Boston* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 99.

⁴ Boyer, *Purity in Print*, 169.

⁵ Jaher, *The Urban Establishment*, 105.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.; Boyer, *Purity in Print*. Boyer’s book gives a full account of the Society’s power in Boston.

The other predominant social group in Boston, the Irish and Italian immigrants, shared the Brahmins' aversion to contemporary art. Both communities tended to be strongly Catholic, with a firm allegiance to the Church. So when the archdiocese, Boston Cardinal William O'Connell, began denouncing modernism and supporting censorship in the city, a substantial portion of the city followed his lead. Much like the Brahmins, O'Connell counted on "tradition" to strengthen the Church, its people, and society; in his biography of the Cardinal, James M. O'Toole describes O'Connell's conviction that "the unrelenting antiworldliness and antimodernism of traditional Catholic belief would certainly win out; by being so rigorously countercultural, Catholicism would save culture."⁷ He pushed for the creation of Boston's Legion of Decency chapter—a Catholic censorship board that monitored movies—and supported many censorship cases in the city.⁸ Some also accused O'Connell of influencing censorship more indirectly, such as Reverend John Haynes Holmes who declared in a public speech that the Cardinal's actions were "an attempt by the Catholic Church in Boston to impose its own standards of decency on all."⁹ Still, thousands of Irish, Italian, and Yankee Bostonians followed Cardinal O'Connell's decency campaigns, leading nearly all of Boston to publicly embrace modesty, tradition, and anti-modernism.

With a majority of Bostonians embracing modest values and traditional cultural institutions since the early twentieth century, government authorities also began to act against "inappropriate" material. Throughout the '20s, the mayor's office and state

⁷ James M. O'Toole, *Militant and Triumphant: William Henry O'Connell and the Catholic Church in Boston, 1859-1944*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 228.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 241.; Charles H. Trout, *Boston, The Great Depression, and the New Deal* (Boston: Oxford University Press, 1977), 24.

⁹ "Cardinal Assailed As Indirect Censor: Reverend John Haynes Homes Hits Local Play Bans," *Boston Globe*, April 6, 1936, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

government strengthened their role as protectors of Boston morals. The state obscenity statute—applied to literature and entertainment—was one of the strictest of its time, outlawing all publications “manifestly tending to corrupt the morals of youth” and books “containing obscene, indecent, or impure language.”¹⁰ In Boston, John Casey was appointed the mayor’s “theatrical advisor” in 1904 and remained in the position through the ‘20s, maintaining, “nothing should be placed upon the stage of any theatre anywhere to which you could not take your mother, sweetheart, wife or sister.” During his tenure, Casey instituted an eight-point “Code of Morals” for theatrical productions, which forbid “lascivious dialogue, gestures, or songs intended to suggest sexual relations; performance in the aisles or auditorium; bare female legs; one-piece union suits worn by women; depictions of drug addicts; all forms of ‘muscle dancing’; profanity; and the portrayal of a moral pervert or sex degenerate, meaning a homosexual.”¹¹ After cultural leaders such as the Brahmins and Churches had established censorship in Boston, the government’s obscenity laws gave city officials the authority to directly moralize theatre.

One of the first prominent censorship cases in Boston was Eugene O’Neill’s *Strange Interlude* in 1929. After a successful run in New York City and a Pulitzer Prize win, the play was scheduled to open at Boston’s Hollis Theatre on September 30. However, Mayor Malcom Nichols, advised by John Casey, deemed it a “disgusting spectacle of immorality” and threatened to shut the Hollis down if the production played there.¹² (He had also rejected a production of O’Neill’s *Desire Under the Elms* three years earlier.¹³) Nichols

¹⁰ Quoted in Boyer, *Purity in Print*, 190.

¹¹ Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, 112.

¹² *Ibid.*, 111–112.

¹³ Neil Miller, *Banned in Boston: The Watch and Ward Society’s Crusade Against Books, Burlesque, and the Social Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 122.

claimed *Strange Interlude* advocated atheism and infidelity, and when the producing company offered to eliminate the most offensive details, he simply objected to the play's entire theme. The company protested that they had been advertising for months in advance and already sold 7,000 tickets. The script had encountered no trouble from city authorities or the notorious Watch and Ward Society when it was sold in Boston bookstores.¹⁴ Even the press complained that Nichols and Casey would make Boston the laughingstock of the nation; the phrase "Banned in Boston" soon became an infamous reference to the city's strict standards. Still, the ban remained and the production was forced to move to nearby Quincy.

Nearly six years later, in 1935, three cases brought Boston's theatrical censorship issues to a head, rallying the city against productions that defied the traditional status quo. In January of 1935, Sean O'Casey's *Within the Gates* was set to premiere at the Schubert Theatre. The Irish playwright's grim drama examines religion, centering on a bishop and his illegitimate daughter as she turns to prostitution and eventually dies. Though O'Casey leaves the bishop's religious affiliation unspecified, most assumed him to be Roman Catholic.¹⁵ Consequently, Catholics—as well as other Christians—felt the play to be offensive and immoral. The Catholic and religious leaders of Boston railed against the play, and in a city so loyal to the Church, they had the power to stop it. Many Boston clerics complained to the mayor. Father Russell M. Sullivan, head of the Boston College Council of Catholic Organizations and active participant in the Legion of Decency, publicly attacked the "sympathetic portrayal of the immoralities described" (prostitution), and "the clear

¹⁴ Ibid., 121.

¹⁵ Ibid., 140.

setting forth of the futility of religion as an effective force in meeting the problems of life.”¹⁶ Mayor Mansfield had at first approved the play with a few minor changes, but under such pressure, sent new City Censor Herbert L. McNary to review the play in New York. When McNary returned, he convinced Mansfield to ban not only the production, but also the printed text.¹⁷ As theatre scholar John Houchin notes, “in the opinion of Boston’s clerical establishment, *Within the Gates* challenged the hegemony of orthodox religion and had to be completely suppressed. And they called upon civic officials to enforce their religious agenda.”¹⁸ When theatre contested religion, Boston’s conservative officials had the authority to shut it down.

At the end of the year, the same theatre—the Schubert—announced its intention to produce Lillian Hellman’s *The Children’s Hour* in January 1936. The tragic drama follows the effects of a schoolgirl’s lie about her teachers’ “unnatural” lesbian relationship, and was critically acclaimed in New York. Yet when the Schubert scheduled it for Boston, Mayor Mansfield again sent his censor to see the Broadway production and judge whether it was decent enough for the city. McNary objected to the theme of homosexuality, and decided that *The Children’s Hour* “was not a proper presentation for a Boston theatre,” leading the mayor to announce a ban on December 14th without ever having seen the play.¹⁹ The show’s New York producers decided to fight city censorship in federal District Court by filing suit against Mayor Mansfield and Commissioner McNary for \$250,000 in damages and petitioning to enjoin the City of Boston from further interference with the

¹⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹⁸ Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, 122.

¹⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 123.

production.²⁰ The producers accused the Mayor and Commissioner of slander and libel against the play. During the proceedings, the Mayor was able to cite both the Moral Code against portrayal of any “moral pervert or sex degenerate,” as well as the fact that he had not technically banned the play, but forced it to face the censorship board (which would have certainly banned it and revoked the theatre’s license).²¹ The producers lost the case, and *The Children’s Hour* did not play in Boston.²²

The third scandalous play of 1935 was censored for reasons beyond the typical “sexual perversion” or anti-religiousness. Clifford Odets’s *Waiting For Lefty* follows a taxi strike, stirring themes of social protest and revolution. Sure his play would be banned for its radicalism, Odets released a statement before the opening that read: “‘Waiting for Lefty’ has been closed by the Boston Police. ‘Expressive of un American [sic] activity’ is the charge. Americanism depends upon your point of view. If you are afraid of the deepest truths of the class conflicts of our times, all liberal or radical activity may be so labeled.”²³ The mayor’s office did allow it to play at the Dudley Street Opera House, but at the opening on April 5, Censor McNary, a police captain, and a police sergeant sat in the audience. Policemen from the city’s “Red Squad” also surrounded the theatre. At the close of the curtain, McNary signaled the policemen to arrest four of the nine cast members, and the play was forced to close.²⁴ Officially, the charge was “using profanity in a public assemblage,” but many believed officials had shut down the play because of its radical

²⁰ Ibid., 124.

²¹ “Refuses to Compel Lifting of Play Ban: Judge Won’t Make Self Licensing Board,” *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, January 14, 1936.

²² Miller, *Banned in Boston: The Watch and Ward Society’s Crusade Against Books, Burlesque, and the Social Evil*, 145.

²³ “Boston Police Halt Play For Profanity: Arrest Four Members of Cast of ‘Waiting for Lefty’ in Premiere There.,” *New York Times*, April 7, 1935.

²⁴ Ibid.

politics. The play was allowed to open with several deletions of profanity, but for many, Bostonian censorship now not only regulated the lewd and irreverent, but also the radical.²⁵

These three scandals—as well as book banning cases and censorship in surrounding cities—set the standard for censorship in Boston by the time the Federal Theatre Project produced *Valley Forge* as its first major play in that city. Cultural institutions and society leaders had powerful influence on government officials who had the authority to shut down plays as they saw fit, whether they were seen as too lewd, irreverent, immoral, or dangerously radical. Maxwell Anderson's *Valley Forge* began rehearsing as part of the Boston Federal Theatre Project's season in January of 1936, just weeks after the uproar over *The Children's Hour*.²⁶ When leaders in the area found the play distasteful, they had a well-established censorship apparatus at their disposal to suppress it. *Valley Forge* depicts George Washington and his soldiers at the low point of the American Revolution, giving a gritty picture of Washington's army. Soldiers are shown deserting camp, swearing, and living in squalor; members of Congress appear petty and even plot against the troops; the usually glorified George Washington nearly loses hope. For the elite Bostonians who revered the past, such a grim view of history amounted to blasphemy.

The Boston FTP had planned to present *Valley Forge* to several cities on a local tour. Troubles began after an early stop in Plymouth, where local Selectman Charles Moning

²⁵ Miller, *Banned in Boston: The Watch and Ward Society's Crusade Against Books, Burlesque, and the Social Evil*, 143.

²⁶ "Boston Civic Theatre Now Rehearsing 'Valley Forge,'" *Daily Boston Globe* (1928-1960), January 12, 1936.

issued a statement calling the play “a combination of obscenity and ‘ham’ acting.”²⁷

Objections poured in, and the Selectmen of Lexington, the tour’s next stop, soon banned the play because of “improper passages.”²⁸ Patrons of the sold-out performance arrived at the theatre to find a sign announcing the cancellation, and stage equipment was shipped back to Boston for the evening.²⁹ Other cities set to host the production—including Leominster and Fitchburg—now required the Federal Theatre Project to cut or alter the offending passages in order to proceed with performances. These passages included “bunkhouse scenes [that] depict the actions and conversations of Washington’s soldiers while off duty” and a scene “depicting a woman camp follower and remarks addressed to her,” during which “much of the conversation is blunt and characteristic more of the barracks than of polite society.”³⁰ The play’s great success in New York was not enough to keep it intact. Though *Valley Forge* played in several cities after Lexington, many Bostonians would continue to associate the Federal Theatre with scandal, and the project lost much of its potential audience for the next year and a half. Much like the cases of 1935, *Valley Forge* lay victim to Boston’s strict moral standards.

The scandal of *Valley Forge* caused further tension within the Federal Theatre Project and Works Progress Administration. After receiving complaints about the play, head of the Massachusetts WPA Paul Edwards nearly instated a censorship board to specifically monitor the Boston FTP and guard the citizens’ moral sensibilities, stating, “if there is any scandal on the federal drama project, I intend to get to the bottom of it and

²⁷ “Banned Play to Be Presented: W. P. A. Cast Going to Leominster and Fitchburg--Lines Deleted Before Protest,” *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, February 21, 1936.

²⁸ Special Dispatch to the Globe, “W.P.A. Play Given Rousing Applause: Fitchburg Audience Likes ‘Valley Forge,’” *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, March 4, 1936.

²⁹ “Banned Play to Be Presented.”

³⁰ *Ibid.*

clean it up.”³¹ Fortunately, he reviewed the situation and withdrew his objections. Still, officials in the state and national Federal Theatre Project distrusted the Boston chapter. In the uproar over the episode, regional director Hiram Motherwell dismissed the Massachusetts FTP State Director Lawrence Hansen as well as two of his assistants.³² Motherwell himself soon resigned due to the controversy.³³ Audience numbers in Boston were so low that National Director Hallie Flanagan tried to dissolve the entire FTP chapter there, but authorities in Washington continued the project.

As it struggled to produce successful works, Federal Theatre Project officials consistently reminded the Boston artists to avoid another *Valley Forge*. Hallie Flanagan told the *Boston Globe*, “the Federal theatre has not progressed far in Massachusetts because of administration tangles and poor selection of plays,” and noted that she would be more involved in the selection process.³⁴ Leading up to the project’s next major production—*Created Equal*—Eastern Region Director Blanding Sloan asked, “please bear in mind the VALLEY FORGE [sic] production, and the sad effects it had on the Boston public’s attitude toward Federal Theatre Productions. The reaction in the public mind is bitter and very antagonistic.”³⁵ Boston’s first major Federal Theatre production had experienced the city’s infamous censorship right out of the gate, and it would leave some scars.

³¹ Elizabeth Ann Osborne, *Staging the People: Community and Identity in the Federal Theatre Project* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 52.; Quoted in Hallie Flanagan, *Arena* (New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1940), 225, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106017214971>.

³² “Ousts Federal Theatre Trio: Motherwell Dismisses Hansen, Assistants State Director Fights Edict, Blames ‘Valley Forge,’” *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, March 6, 1936.

³³ George Kazacoff, *Dangerous Theatre: The Federal Theatre Project as a Forum for New Plays* (New York: Xlibris Corp., 2011).

³⁴ “Actor Projects’ Head Looks For Theatre Here: Mrs. Flanagan Declares Work Will Be ‘American, First of All,’” *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, August 5, 1936.

³⁵ Quoted in Osborne, *Staging the People*, 52.

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